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A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF YOUNG AUSTRALIAN ADULTS' UNDERSTANDING OF AND EXPLANATIONS FOR ALCOHOL-INVOLVED RAPE

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Abstract

Little is known about the beliefs that underlie the biased attributions that typically characterise people's perceptions of intoxicated sexual perpetrators and their victims. Guided by consensual qualitative research, we explored young Australian adults' (18-25 years; *N* = 15) attributions for an alcohol-involved rape based on focus groups and interviews. Prominent themes indicated that participants rarely labelled the assault as rape and, instead, adhered to miscommunication explanations. Participants emphasised the developmental value of the victimisation experience although recognising its harmful consequences. Both perpetrator and victim were held strongly responsible based on perceived opportunities to prevent the assault but implicit justifications were, nevertheless, evident. As such, explicit and implicit attributions were contradictory, with the latter reflecting the attributional double-standard previously observed in quantitative rape-perception research. Findings underscore the need to challenge pervasive rape myths and equip young adults with knowledge on how to respond supportively to the commonly stigmatised victims of rape.

Keywords: Alcohol, rape, young adults, perception, attribution, consensual qualitative research, responsibility, blame

A Qualitative Exploration of Young Australian Adults' Understanding of and Explanations for Alcohol-Involved Rape

Alcohol consumption frequently precedes sexual assault experiences and is associated with more severe assault outcomes (e.g., force, injury; Bedard-Gilligan, Kaysen, Desai, & Lee, 2011) and negative social reactions from support providers (Ullman & Najdowski, 2010). Narratives of female victims' phenomenological experience of alcohol-involved sexual violence and its aftermath signal that these women struggle with trauma and associated feelings of betrayal, self-blame, and fear (Kalmakis, 2011). Importantly, negative reactions to a victim's initial disclosure may reinforce self-blaming attributions (Ullman & Najdowski, 2011) and determine whether she will seek further support (Ahrens, 2006).

Based on these potential harmful post-assault consequences, the need for supportive social responses to victims of alcohol-involved rape is critical to facilitate recovery and encourage reporting. This need is accentuated by the finding that most rape victims disclose their assault to an informal support provider, such as a friend (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012), and that being blamed by these support providers is a key barrier for victims to seek further assistance from formal agencies, such as the police (Leivore, 2003). It is widely recognised that rape is a vastly underreported crime (e.g., Daly & Bouhours, 2010; Victorian Law Reform Commission, 2004), warranting continued efforts to reduce barriers to reporting.

Support providers' reactions to victim disclosure are determined by their understanding of, and attributions for, the assault. Quantitative rape-perception research indicates that perceivers adhere to a double-standard in their evaluations of perpetrators and victims of alcohol-involved rape; whereas intoxicated perpetrators are seen as less responsible (Cameron & Stritzke, 2003; Richardson & Campbell, 1982), intoxicated victims are held more responsible (Scronce & Corcoran, 1995), seen as less likeable (Hammock & Richardson, 1997), and more sexually disinhibited (Wall & Schuller, 2000) compared to their

sober counterparts. These appraisals are likely to shape people's responses to victim-disclosure.

The social attributional double-standard (Richardson & Campbell, 1982) is established in sexual violence literature (however, studies assessing perpetrator evaluations overall show less consistency). Little is known about the beliefs that underlie these attributions with some qualitative research being undertaken to enrich the understanding of perceivers' attributions for rape. This research has focused on conversations about non-alcohol-involved rape (Anderson, 1999), victims' own attributions for alcohol-involved rape (Testa & Livingston, 1999), and mock-jurors' deliberation process in trials involving intoxicants (e.g., Ellison & Munro, 2009).

Notably, findings of these qualitative studies indicate that responsibility and blame is attributed without prompting in natural conversations about rape (Anderson, 1999) and that alcohol is seen as a strong contributing factor (Testa & Livingston, 1999) and functions to normalise intoxicated sexual violence (Ellison & Munro, 2009). In attempting to elucidate perceivers' reactions to alcohol-involved sexual violence outside of a legal context, however, such research may lack applicability for a number of reasons. First, alcohol-involved rape tends to be associated with specific situational characteristics (e.g., committed by an acquaintance in social settings, Abbey, Clinton, McAuslan, Zawacki, & Buck, 2002; Bedard-Gilligan, et al., 2011) and specific post-assault consequences for victims (Ullman & Najdowski, 2010), indicating that these assaults could be better understood as a distinct form of sexual violence. As suggested by rape-perception research, perceivers adhere to a double-standard when making attributions for alcohol-involved rape, further warranting a distinction between alcohol-involved and non-alcohol involved sexual violence in scientific investigations. Accordingly, for the purpose of this study, Anderson's (1999) analysis of conversations about rape should be interpreted with consideration to its focus on non-alcohol-

involved rape. Second, given the maladaptive cognitive changes that may result from a traumatic experience such as sexual victimisation (Muran, 2007), victims' attributions for their own experiences, as reported by Testa and Livingston (1999), may differ from perceiver attributions. Third, initial disclosures are most likely to be made to informal support providers (e.g., Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012); thus, the contextualisation of mock-trials (Ellison & Munro, 2009), guided by the legal definition of rape and the goal-oriented task of determining a verdict, shares little similarity with this process.

Rationale for the Current Research

Overall, rape-perception research to date has relied on quantitative paradigms to inform theoretical understanding of rape attributions, justifying the call for further qualitative research. In Australia, following decades of legal reform and policy changes, public attitudes towards sexual violence are starting to improve although rape myths and negative views of rape victims may still be prevalent in the community (Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, 2010). However, the tenuous understanding of beliefs relating specifically to alcohol's role in sexual violence warrants attention, especially given the cultural acceptance of alcohol and its central role in young Australian adults' social lives (Grace, Moore, & Northcote, 2009) and the strong association of alcohol with sexual assault (see Broach, 2004). Establishing this culturally specific understanding may provide a platform for identifying education and intervention strategies to counteract justifications for intoxicated sexual aggression and improve social responses to victims of alcohol-involved rape.

Target Population

Although one-third of Australian women have experienced some form of sexual violence, including rape, at some stage in their lifetime, young adults are particularly vulnerable to these experiences (Mouzos & Makkai, 2004). Given that victims typically disclose their assault to friends (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012) young adults are most likely to

be primary support providers for victims. How young adults make sense of the assault-experience and respond to these disclosures may, therefore, affect these victims' further help-seeking behaviours.

Many young adults are motivated to drink alcohol specifically to get "high" (Patrick & Schulenberg, 2011) and are particularly likely to consume high quantities of alcohol on any one occasion (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011). In addition, alcohol-expectancy literature has revealed that young adults drink alcohol to experience its expected positive effects on, for example, sexual feelings and assertion (Young, Connor, Ricciardelli, & Saunders, 2006) which may also contribute to high-risk behaviours. Due to these risky drinking patterns and their demonstrated association with alcohol-related harms (for example, sexual victimisation) (Connor, Gray, & Kypri, 2010), an exploration of young adults' beliefs about the role of alcohol in sexual violence is both important and timely.

Study Purpose and Aims

This study represents an initial qualitative exploration of young Australians' (i.e., 18-25 years) understanding of, and explanations for, alcohol-involved rape. More specifically, the purpose of this study was to form a rich understanding of the beliefs which underlie reactions to alcohol-involved rape given that the perpetrators and victims of this crime are evaluated in ways that suggests a double-standard. A number of specific research aims informed this qualitative exploration; (1) to identify themes that characterise young adults' understanding of, and explanations for, alcohol-involved rape; (2) to describe expected reactions and social responses to a perpetrator and victim in the aftermath of alcohol-involved rape; and (3) to identify if, and describe how, young adults use cues relating to alcohol intoxication to exonerate the perpetrator or to blame the victim.

Methodology

This qualitative study was guided by Hill, Thompson, and William's (1997) Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) approach. CQR is inductive and, as such, domains (overarching topic areas) and categories (themes developed from cross-analysis of cases) are developed based on collected data, consistent with the study's exploratory aim. CQR shares theoretical underpinnings with more established qualitative methodologies, such as Giorgi's (1970) phenomenology and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The epistemological position is that researchers, as "trustworthy reporters", can make meaningful interpretations of the subjective human experience (Hill et al., 2005), although, their personal "biases and expectations" are likely to colour these interpretations (Hill, et al., 1997). The subjective "truth" can be meaningfully captured through researchers' openness about biases and expectations as well as an iterative process which involves continuous negotiations between research team members to arrive at consensus. Consistent with epistemological underpinnings, CQR aims to stay close to participants' natural language to fairly represent their reported experience. CQR was developed by psychologists and has been a useful approach for researchers to explore the psychology of violence and sex-related issues (Mullens, Young, Hamernik, & Dunne, 2009; O'Brien, Cohen, Pooley, & Taylor, 2013; Williams, Wyatt, Resell, Peterson, & Asuan-O'Brien, 2004).

Data Collection Method

Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was provided by the university's Human Research Ethics Committee. Qualitative data were collected in six small, same-sex focus groups and two interviews that ranged in duration from 25 to 70 minutes. Only focus groups were scheduled but, due to non-attendance and out of respect for participants who did attend, some sessions were conducted as interviews. Although not planned, the use of both focus groups and interviews allowed for triangulation of the method to decrease biases associated

with specific data-collection methods (Casey & Murphy, 2009; Hill, et al., 1997). We found that focus groups, in particular, resulted in rich and open discussions facilitated by the group process through which participants were given the opportunity to elaborate, contrast, and contest ideas, in line with other studies examining sensitive topics, such as sex and violence (Abrahamson, 2006; Frith, 2000). The first author moderated all sessions and a female assistant moderator with relevant training was present to help with practical tasks and facilitate the collection of rich data by probing for elaboration and clarification of unexplored themes.

Participants and Procedure

Hill et al. (1997) estimate saturation is typically reached in a sample size of 8 to 15 participants and their own review of CQR literature provides support for this assumption (Hill et al., 2005). In this study, participants were six men and nine women aged between 18 and 24 years recruited via snowball sampling and online advertisements through a large Queensland university on the east coast of Australia. Half of the participants (n = 7, one participant did not respond) were single, and most (n = 12) were of Australian or New Zealand backgrounds. Most participants (n = 7) had completed high school as their highest level of education, three had completed a Technical and Further Education (TAFE; government-funded registered training organisations in Australia) course, and the remaining five participants held university degrees. Six participants were students only, five participants combined their studies with work, and the remaining four participants were employed part-time or full-time.

During the focus-group and interview sessions, the researcher explained that the study's purpose was to gain an understanding of their views of, and reactions to, other people's unwanted sexual experiences (the word rape was not mentioned to allow participants to make their own interpretations). The sensitive nature of the topic was emphasised to caution

participants about potential feelings of discomfort (and people who had had a distressing experience under the influence of alcohol or otherwise were discouraged from participation)[1]. All participants signed a written consent form and focus group participants signed a confidentiality agreement to ensure that individuals' responses were not discussed outside the focus-group setting.

Following a broad introductory question to facilitate topic reflection and participant engagement, participants were presented with a written scenario portraying a man, "Michael", and a woman, "Jessica", meeting and getting acquainted at a party. As the night progresses, Michael and Jessica drink, dance, and flirt with each other, and, as the party starts to die down, accompany each other to a bedroom. Once in the bedroom, Michael and Jessica start kissing and undressing each other. The scenario ends after Michael ignores Jessica's subsequent verbal objections (non-consent) and continues to have sex with Jessica against her will. The interview schedule was semi-structured, allowing consistent data to be collected across cases (Hill, et al., 2005) and related to (1) contributing factors to the incident described; (2) the role of alcohol; (3) the perpetrator's and victim's emotional and behavioural reactions in the aftermath; (4) perceived normative social responses; and (5) responsibility and blame. When necessary, the moderators probed participants for elaboration or clarification and regularly rephrased and summarised participants' comments as a form of "member-checking" (Murphy & Dingwall, 2003).

Rigor

Consistent with the CQR approach, a number of strategies were employed to strengthen the rigor of the research process. Prior to data collection, the interview schedule and written scenario were piloted with a small student sample ($N = 6$) and was subsequently amended and

[1] We acknowledged the potential for rape disclosure in the focus groups and therefore emphasised that the study was not about personal experiences. The first author (who also moderated the groups) sought advice from a rape crisis centre on how to respond supportively and sensitively to disclosure in a group situation. However, no participant disclosed sexual (or other form of) victimisation nor the perpetration of sexual assault.

refined. During the data collection process, the first author kept records of personal expectations and reflections which facilitated the analysis of data. To monitor the analysis, the fourth author audited preliminary results and feedback was incorporated in the final analysis. To demonstrate the representativeness of results to the sample, frequency labels were assigned to the categories: *General* applies to all cases, *typical* apply to half of the cases or more, and *variant* applies to less than half but more than one of the cases.

Biases and Expectations

According to Hill et al. (2005; 1997), researchers should be open about, and present in detail, their biases and expectations which may colour their interpretations of the data. We believe that the relatively diverse backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge of the research team members in this study assisted with formulating a rich and meaningful description of participants' subjective experience.

The first author is a PhD candidate with training in qualitative methods and experience with interviewing people in vulnerable positions about traumatic events and sensitive topics. Importantly, this author's experience of being a recipient of initial rape disclosure could, potentially, have affected her subjective interpretation of the results of this study; however, this experience has also facilitated a passionate engagement in the research process. The second author is a clinical psychologist with extensive experience in alcohol research and qualitative methodology and has previously used CQR in his research. His clinical background and knowledge has contributed to important discussions between research-team members about the influence of gender and use of language. He has also been the recipient of alcohol-related rape disclosure in his professional and personal life. The third author is a forensic psychologist and Barrister-at-Law. He also provides expert reports for the courts, child-safety and corrective services and specialises in the treatment of violent and sexual offenders. This author has contributed with crucial knowledge of sexual assault definitions

from a legal perspective, sexual perpetrators' own attributions for their offending and the empirically evidenced link between alcohol and violent behaviour. The fourth author is a social psychologist with substantial research experience in social cognition. The marriage of social, clinical, and forensic perspectives in research-team discussions has contributed to a rigorous analysis process.

Data Analysis

Focus-group discussions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The research-team members independently reviewed the first four transcripts which were discussed in face-to-face meetings until consensus was reached. The first author subsequently coded the remaining transcripts. The auditor reviewed preliminary results and looked for evidence in the data to support the categories but also for data unaccounted for. As a result of the iterative process and auditor feedback, domains and categories were amended based on over and under inclusion.

Results

Data were collected until theoretical saturation occurred. Derived from iterative examination of the data and continued negotiation between research-team members as well as feedback from the auditor, three domains and 16 categories were developed. The specific role of alcohol was analysed separately and will not be discussed in this paper (manuscript submitted for publication). The domains and categories and their frequency labels are presented in Table 1. Quotes are included in this section to illustrate the categories but participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

Domain 1: Labelling

The way that participants labelled the rape incident described in the scenario coloured much of the focus-group discussions. Although this labelling was rarely explicit, it was made visible by the terminology used by participants, through discussions of the hypothetical

perpetrator's and victim's emotional reactions, as well as the perceived normative social responses in the aftermath of the rape. Lending support to the perceived ambiguity of the incident described in the scenario, participants often adhered to multiple or conflicting labels.

It was not a "legitimate" rape. Some explicit discussions about rape did arise, although, these discussions were mostly characterised by uncertainty. The requirement of forcefulness and physical resistance in determining whether the experience qualified as rape was evident in these discussions. Accordingly, the "legitimate" rape was seen as an experience different from the one described in the scenario.

> *Grace, 21 years*: ... you can say no and then just like not do anything but if you're physically trying to get someone off kind of thing and push them away and... or like you're crying or something, then that's... I would consider that rape...

Despite this evident theme, it is important to note that, of the 15 participants, two men explicitly labelled the depicted scenario as rape. One of these men assigned this label in response to prompting, yet, subsequently trivialised the experience by suggesting that others may "overdramatise" the experience as a "brutal rape or something" (*Liam, 19 years*). The other male participant, however, verbalised an unmistaken belief that the experience constituted rape.

> *Daniel, 24 years*: I don't know if he can do anything to fix the situation apart from go to the police, I mean... It's clearly a rape...

It was a misunderstanding. The idea that the rape was an unfortunate misunderstanding or resulted from miscommunication between the perpetrator and the victim underpinned causal attributions for the rape. As such, interactions between the perpetrator and the victim as well as potential erroneous interpretations of the victim's behaviour were emphasised to *explain why* the rape occurred. This idea resonates also with the characterisation of the

perpetrator as the “nice guy” who would be apologetic and remorseful in the aftermath of the rape.

> *Chloe, 21 years*: Yeah, in that, if she was intoxicated and they’d already started, you could have been, kind of, not even a physical no, just a like a ‘no no’ but not actually like a ‘get off me’...” *Moderator*: Yeah right. *Chloe*: ... you know, a strong, forceful no, in which case... Michael may have got the message more clearly if she was more wilful in her no.
>
> *Isaac, 24 years*: ... in the same scenario but without drinking, if they did end up upstairs and she did say stop, perhaps if he didn’t have alcohol, he would be ‘Oh, ok, I heard... I heard what you said’ sort of thing, instead of just carrying on...

Intertwined further with the conceptualisation of the rape as a misunderstanding was the assumption that men lack a fundamental understanding of women’s sexual intentions and communication and, therefore, that they need women’s direction and advice to see the “girl’s point of view”.

> *Grace, 21 years*: ... if Michael was my guy friend and he said ‘she said no, but I was really drunk at the time and I just thought she wanted it’ kind of thing, I would help him to kind of see a girl’s point of view about it and just say ‘look, next time a girl says no, just actually stop and just... like, really force yourself to stop and just think *ok* and just ask her again if she wants this to happen, if she’s ok with it and, like, even if you’re with someone and they don’t say no, still ask the girl next time’.

It was wrong. It was common for participants to downplay the seriousness of the rape although characterising the perpetrator’s actions as morally “wrong”. As such, his sexually aggressive behaviour was seen as inappropriate or as a mistake; however, the criminal nature of this behaviour remained unacknowledged. Accordingly, participants referred to the perpetrator’s personal characteristics to suggest that he would be the type of person who

"takes advantage of" women and who uses "story-telling" in the aftermath of the rape to brag about his sexual conquest. Although these type of men were described as "immature" (*Ben, 20 years*) or "players" (colloquial term used for a person who manipulate others for sex) (*Lucy, 18 years*), they were not described as rapists.

It was illegal. Some participants expressed recognition that the perpetrator had committed an act that was illegal; however, the label of rape was, still, noticeably absent from these statements. Further, the contextualisation of these discussions often reflected an attenuation of the seriousness of the incident or confusion as to whether the incident was, in fact, rape and was demonstrated in a number of ways; for example, by rationalising the victim's motive or basis for reporting the incident to the police and, as such, invalidating the victim's right to obtain justice for a criminal act.

> *Tom, 24 years*: I suppose [he would be] worried about the police as well if she was gonna get that far. (emphasis added)

It was a learning experience. One way in which female participants (this theme was not evident in male focus groups/interviews) sought to give meaning to the incident in its aftermath was to emphasise the opportunity, and sometimes obligation, for the victim to learn from her experience. Underpinning this view was an unspoken acceptance that these experiences are, to some extent, unavoidable and that women for this reason need to learn to adopt protective strategies. Statements of this sort, however, also served to imply that the victim's behaviour had caused the incident; that is, if she would have acted differently, she would not have been victimised.

> *Zoe, 23 years*: ... it's not a good thing but it's a learning step I guess, and, hopefully, next time she wouldn't drink as much or hopefully, next time, she'd be able to say no... more forcefully.

It was a shameful/regretful experience. When describing the victim's expected emotional response to the incident, it was common for participants to assume feelings of self-blame, shame, and regret. Although such assumptions were generally coupled with expressions of empathy and concern for the victim's well-being, the discussions simultaneously served to reinforce the perception that the experience itself was shameful.

> *Emily, 18 years*: She'd probably feel ashamed just for letting herself getting into that situation because once it's happened, you can blame them as much as you want, but like when you think back to the actions beforehand, like, she did lead herself into that situation kind of thing.

It was a violation. Although the incident was rarely labelled as rape, most participants acknowledged that the experience would cause the victim emotional harm, at least in the short term. As such, feelings of anger, violation, and sadness were seen as normative reactions to the incident described.

It was a trivial experience. Finally, the idea that the victim might have been unconcerned about the incident or even re-constructed the assault as a "positive" in its aftermath, although not as strongly represented in the data, was put forward by some of the participants.

> *Mia, 21 years*: She could have shrugged it off in the morning, she might have gone 'ah ok, look, I didn't want that but, hey, captain of the football team' or something and made a positive out of it.

Domain 2: Social Responses

Discussions about perceived normative social responses and participants' own anticipated responses to the perpetrator and victim provided further indication of how participants in this study conceptualised the incident described in the scenario and, also, its aftermath. Participants discussed both positive and negative social responses which, mostly,

mirrored victims' own descriptions of the social reactions they typically receive from informal and formal support providers (Ullman, 2010).

Instrumental support. Participants typically recognised a need for both the perpetrator and the victim to receive information, counselling, and other tangible support after the incident. As such, participants often expressed the intention to provide advice, seek out professional support or assist with contact with formal agencies in response to perpetrator or victim disclosure.

> *Emily, 18 years*: ... maybe tell her... she might not want her parents to know, but maybe like, a counsellor or something or like a school counsellor or someone like that might have some insight into the topic more than just friends would.
>
> *Charlotte, 24 years*: I'd be looking, though, for support for him. He'd clearly need help...

Emotional support. Since participants viewed the incident as a hurtful or emotionally damaging experience to the victim, they recognised the importance of providing emotional support to her in the aftermath of the assault. This emotional support was seen also as a normative response from friends and family following an incident such as the one described in the scenario. Emotional support included providing comfort, being there for the victim, and trying to understand her needs. Participants also discussed the perpetrator's need to receive emotional support and expressed willingness to provide this support if he was feeling guilty or remorseful.

However, while acknowledging the importance of instrumental and emotional support, participants also identified several barriers for the victim, in particular, to seek comfort from support providers, such as not knowing how or to whom to reach out, self-blame or a fear of being blamed by others, and friends' or family members' endorsement of traditional gender

roles. Some participants also expressed reluctance to "get involved" (*Liam 19 years*; *Tom, 24 years*) or feelings of inadequacy to respond appropriately.

> *Grace, 21 years*: There's just a stigma that could be flipped around so then she wouldn't say anything because she wouldn't want to seem like that person.
>
> *Emma 24 years*: Yeah, I do agree that I would feel inadequate in terms of being able to comfort her and counsel her through that situation. I would definitely feel that maybe I would be doing more harm than good.

Negative responses. Participants contrasted supportive responses with their potential negative responses to the perpetrator and the victim, but also as expected from family, friends, and acquaintances. For the perpetrator, these responses most often related to distancing, disapproval or anger whereas, for the victim, negative responses related to blame and derogatory views of her behaviour and character. However, participants frequently linked negative social reactions to the victim to "society" at large or specific others to, arguably, oppose their own endorsement of victim-blaming attitudes (i.e., others will sometimes respond negatively to the victim, but I would not).

> *Emma, 24 years*: I'd probably just distance myself from him.
>
> *Lily, 19 years*: ... when you have that situation that you've said yes and then you say no and then you've got that society of 'you're a tease' sort of thing.

Asking for details. Some participants also expressed a need to find out in more detail what had happened before and during the assault, in part to establish how to label the assault. Asking for details served to evaluate the seriousness (i.e., forcefulness) of the situation and whether Michael's behaviour and character fitted a description of a "legitimate" sexual aggressor.

Mia, 21 years: You ask them really delicately what happened just to gauge if it was serious, if it wasn't, what their reaction was to it, how did the other person react, maybe there was miscommunication, maybe there are things to be done better.

Ben, 20 years: [I would] ask him if to find out if he's had lots of alcohol or any other drugs and that sort of thing... and just work out whether it was... something that's him...

Praise. In contrast with perceived normative social responses to victim disclosure, responses to the perpetrator were thought of as largely determined by his character and the character of persons belonging to his social network, in particular his friends. As such, most participants acknowledged the somewhat vague existence of a specific "type of guy" that would view his sexual aggressive behaviour with pride and would receive praise from his friends. It is important to note, however, that this praise was most frequently positioned in the context of the perpetrator's inaccurate story-telling or bragging about the rape as a sexual conquest rather than a non-consensual sexual encounter.

Emma, 24 years: I know there are some guys who would congratulate him on this power trip...

Domain 3: Risks, Responsibility, and Blame

When participants were asked about responsibility and blame for incidents such as the one described, discussions – which were previously characterised by mild language and focused largely on attenuating circumstances – changed tack and the importance of individual choice, protective strategies, and preventability was emphasised. Participants talked about the risks that alcohol and settings which involved alcohol implicated. However, responsibility and blame for intoxicated behaviour and associated negative outcomes were ultimately placed on the individual.

The setting allowed for it to happen. Participants frequently talked about the contributory role of alcohol impairment, the party atmosphere, and, in some instances, the

absence of a peer "guardian" to prevent the progression of events leading up to the rape. This reasoning, in theory, relates to causality which is a construct subordinate to responsibility and blame (Shaver, 1985) but can also, in this particular context, be conceptualised as perceived proximal risks for sexual aggression and victimisation.

> *Emily, 18 years*: Obviously the people involved [are responsible], but I think alcohol does play a part... cause it sets the scene, it makes the situation what it is, like... it allows for the situation almost, cause it wouldn't happen without it sort of... a catalyst.

His choices were conscious and deliberate. Discussions about the perpetrator's responsibility or blameworthiness made apparent a re-conceptualisation of his actions as conscious and deliberate compared to previous discussions that focused on miscommunication and impairment related to alcohol. Participants strongly adhered to a view that personal choice overshadowed environmental contributors when allocating responsibility and blame.

> *Mia, 21 years*: Drinking is always a factor but when it comes down to it, you decide how much you've had to drink, you decide at the end of the day... that, all these circumstances leading up to [indiscernible], you decide what these mean in your mind... [...] ... in the end, he made that decision to go ahead...

She could have prevented it. The significance of personal choice also affected participants' negotiation of the victim's responsibility and blame for the rape. This negotiation process typically related to the perceived preventability of the incident. Inherent in this assertion is the belief that she *should* have foreseen the outcome and implemented appropriate protective strategies. Her victimisation was, accordingly, seen as a result of ignorance (she "allowed" it to happen/she "put" herself in the situation), irresponsible behaviour (she went to a bedroom with a person she did not know well), and/or a failure to adopt efficient strategies for self-protection (she did not resist forcefully enough). These

processes were constructed by participants as a result of conscious and deliberate choices, leading to high victim responsibility/blame attributions.

> *Chloe, 21 years*: I still think, even if he was holding her down, it's still fairly... largely her responsibility, given that she got herself into a situation where... *Zoe, 23 years*: Mm. *Chloe, 21 years*: ... she allowed that to happen.

Discussion

This qualitative study aimed to explore Australian young adults' beliefs relating to alcohol-involved sexual aggression and victimisation. The prominent themes in the focus-group and interview discussions suggest that participants in this study were reluctant to label an alcohol-involved rape as such and, instead, adhered to miscommunication models (e.g., Kitzinger & Frith, 1999) and labels which minimised the seriousness of the assault. The term rape was reserved for a forceful, brutal attack and did not, according to most participants, reflect the nature of the incident described. Nevertheless, discussions about the perpetrator's and victim's own expected reactions and perceived normative social responses to both parties indicated that participants recognised the trauma or distress that may have been inflicted. At the same time, however, it was acknowledged that perpetrators, to some extent, may be praised for their sexually coercive behaviour while victims may be viewed in derogatory ways. Several significant barriers for the victim to talk about her experience in the aftermath of the assault were identified but some participants also expressed reluctance to "get involved" or inadequacy in providing the support that these victims need. Finally, discussions about risks, responsibility, and blame signalled that, although contextual factors (e.g., alcohol) were perceived as contributing strongly to the portrayed characters' behaviour and consequently to the assault, an individual's agency in making choices and, thus, "acting responsibly" within such circumstances was ultimately seen to overshadow situational forces, leading to high responsibility attributions to the perpetrator but, also, to his victim.

Nevertheless, responsibility and blame were discounted for the perpetrator and further allocated to the victim in implicit and subtle ways through rhetoric and unspoken assumptions consistent with the double-standard established in the sexual violence literature.

A specific aim of this study was to identify themes which characterise young adults' understanding of, and explanations for, alcohol-involved sexual violence. Overall, the labels that were implicitly and explicitly assigned to the rape described in the scenario reveal themes that function to trivialise the act of sexual aggression and imply victim-precipitation. This understanding was also evident in participants' use of language which was surprisingly mild and appeared to suggest that many participants viewed the incident merely as a "bad" or regrettable experience and, thus, differentiated the "legitimate" rape. This differentiation was evident even when participants acknowledged the wrongful or illegal nature of the perpetrator's behaviour. Only one male participant labelled the scenario as "clearly" constituting rape. This finding lends support to international literature which has shown that non-stereotypical experiences of non-consensual sex are less likely to be labelled as a rape by observers (e.g., Schuller, McKimmie, Masser, & Klippenstine, 2010; Scronce & Corcoran, 1995) and, also, by victims themselves (e.g., Kahn, Jackson, Kully, Badger, & Halvorsen, 2003). Further, this finding echoes the idea that some people continue to hold erroneous "real rape scripts" (Ryan, 2011) despite a positive shift in public attitudes to sexual violence (Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, 2010).

Importantly, emotional support and validating responses from informal support providers may have a significant and positive impact on victims' adjustment (Filipas & Ullman, 2001). These responses inherently rely on the recognition that a rape has occurred. The finding that most young adults in this study were reluctant to authenticate the rape is, therefore, problematic and may imply that characteristics that are *typical* of alcohol-involved rape (i.e., committed by an acquaintance, occuring in a social setting, preceded by mutual alcohol

consumption; Abbey, et al., 2002; Ullman & Najdowski, 2010) may be seen as attenuating circumstances. Efforts are needed to target young adults for education on the definition of this crime while challenging attitudes that minimise its seriousness regardless of circumstance.

The conceptualisation of the rape as resulting from misunderstanding or miscommunication was evident in participants' explanations for the incident described. As such, participants verbalised strong expectations of "token resistance" (indicating sexual refusal despite intention and willingness to have sex; see Muehlenhard & Rodgers, 1998) as a natural part of intoxicated seduction as well as men's perceived lack of understanding of women's communicative cues, including sexual refusals. This conceptualisation is problematic given that it conveys assumptions that reflect pervasive cultural myths about rape. Expectations of token resistance specifically serve to reinforce the myth that "women say no when they really mean yes" and that "women get raped because the way they said no was ambiguous" (see Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). The focus on miscommunication in young adults' understanding of rape is consistent with recent qualitative studies in Australia which drew on young males' group discussions about rape and sexual refusals (O'Byrne, Hansen, & Rapley, 2008; O'Byrne, Rapley, & Hansen, 2006). Adopting a discourse approach, the authors found that these men relied on claims of misunderstanding when explaining rape but, at the same time, both acknowledged the use and showed a refined understanding of subtle verbal and non-verbal sexual refusals. Although experimental research has shown that the pharmacological effect of alcohol, to some extent, increases men's tendency to make sexualised interpretations of a woman's behaviour (e.g., Abbey, Zawacki, & Buck, 2005), sexually aggressive males are likely to hold a number of distinctive attitudinal and experiential characteristics (Abbey, McAuslan, Zawacki, Clinton, & Buck, 2001) that, arguably, moderate alcohol's facilitation of sexually aggressive behaviour. Consistent with

this argument, Abbey (2011) posits that alcohol likely determines *when* rather than *who* is sexually violent. Therefore, ambiguous signals of non-consent cannot account for and should not be central to the understanding of men's sexually coercive behaviour as such explanations tend to disregard the multi-faceted and complex nature of the sexual negotiation process (Beres, 2010) as well as the sexual aggressor. Allowing the myth that a forceful no will prevent rape to remain entrenched in public perceptions will only serve to provide sexually aggressive men with excuses for their coercive behaviour ex-post facto.

A second aim of this study was to describe expected reactions and social responses in the aftermath of alcohol-involved sexual violence. Although young adults' labelling of the rape suggested that the seriousness of the assault was minimised, discussions about its aftermath indicated that the experience, nevertheless, was understood as harmful or damaging for both the perpetrator and the victim. Participants frequently described the victim's expected reaction in terms of feeling violated and, thus, recognised the intrusiveness of the experience regardless of how it was labelled. The perpetrator's perceived normative emotional reaction was consistent with his victim's. As such, once in a sober state, participants assumed feelings of regret parallel with the realisation of his "mistake" or misunderstanding. Again, this reaction is reminiscent of a miscommunication model of rape and its inherent problematic assumptions; it may, alternatively, signal that these young adults recognise that sexual aggressors do not uniformly fit into the stereotype of the non-remorseful, mentally disturbed, violent attacker (Lev-Wiesel, 2004). Sexual aggression (whether defined as rape or not) is committed by individuals with distinctive attitudes and prior experiences, although, these individuals are far from homogenous. The appreciation of this diversity may explain why participants' views of the male character, overall, were ambivalent and questions regarding his "true" nature and intentions were repeatedly raised.

There was overall agreement regarding the victim's and (for the most part) the perpetrator's needs for emotional and instrumental support and participants generally voiced compassion and empathetic concern regarding the victim's well-being following the assault. Participants' willingness to provide support did not, however, always correspond with the perpetrator's and victim's perceived needs. Some female participants revealed feelings of inadequacy about how to react in response to victim disclosure. This acknowledgement highlights the need to educate young adults about how to provide support to victims of rape while raising awareness about the potential impact that these responses may have on mental-health outcomes and reporting. Importantly, the recognition of multiple barriers to disclosure and the fear of negative social responses indicate that young adults in this study were aware of these real-life issues.

The most troublesome views were conveyed implicitly. For example, participants' discussions about the rape scenario were strongly victim-focused. Perhaps consistent with a definition of the rape as regrettable sex, participants conceptualised the experience as shameful or regretful for the victim and drew on the "lessons you learn" (*Mia, 21 years*) and, thus, the *developmental value* of this experience. Although participants were accurate in identifying self-blame as a significant emotional post-assault response (Moor & Farchi, 2011), some statements clearly signalled the more problematic view that these feelings, to some extent, were substantiated. For example, one participant made meta-statements regarding the victim's pre-existing motives and values to call attention to her *out-of-character* (i.e., shameful) behaviour.

This study's final aim was to identify if, and how, alcohol intoxication served to alleviate or increase responsibility or blameworthiness. Rhetorical attributions of responsibility were evident in that participants repeatedly and unanimously emphasised the victim's role in causing the assault as a result of "putting herself" or "getting herself into" a

vulnerable position. These types of implicit responsibility/blame attributions were, most of the time, linked with alcohol's impairment on cognition and behaviour. As such, participants used cues relating to alcohol to blame the victim in subtle ways via unspoken, shared assumptions and the use of language. Similarly, suggestions relating to the man's lack of awareness or misunderstanding of the woman's sexual refusal due to his impaired state served to, in part, discount his responsibility.

Interestingly, whereas intoxicated impairment and altered cognitions and behaviours were central in these subtle attributions and justifications, when asked explicitly about responsibility and blame, participants reframed these processes and conceptualised them as deliberate and conscious. Critical decisions were seen as those which initiated and concluded the progression of events. For example, the conscious decision to drink alcohol in the first place, or to go up to the bedroom, was seen as introducing foreseeability and preventability of the incident. Some participants also referred to the woman's response to sexual coercion to emphasise her "choice" not to prevent Michael's advances, thus, failing to take responsibility for her own safety. Ultimately, however, the perpetrator's decision to persist his sexual advances in spite of the victim's objections was seen as the crucial element warranting his blameworthiness.

Discussions about responsibility and blame, overall, suggest that the perpetrator's and victim's perceived capacity to resist, prevent, or avoid the assault by making different choices and controlling their behaviour negated alcohol's impairments as explicit justification for their behaviour despite the fact that more subtle rhetorical justifications were evident. Participants' strong emphasis on the accountable individual resonates with a "responsibilisation" paradigm which posits that remaining in control and "self-policing" one's behaviour while intoxicated is the expected norm shared by young adults (Lindsay, 2009). This observation is relevant to existing literature which has identified a double-

standard in observers' attributions for rape (e.g., Richardson & Campbell, 1982). The findings of this study imply that this double-standard is upheld through implicit assumptions regarding alcohol's role in sexual violence (e.g., intoxication makes "nice guys" misunderstand women who behave in "shameful" ways) while it is explicitly rejected due to shared norms about individual accountability.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study provide a rich, context-specific description of young Australian adults' understanding of, and explanations for, alcohol-involved sexual violence and highlight several critical educational needs. First, the participants' reluctance to label the incident as rape warrants efforts to publicly educate young people about the definition of rape and the importance of validating a victim's experience. There also remains an urgent call for rape-prevention programs in Australia to focus on the perceived role of sexual miscommunication by emphasising young adults' existing, sophisticated ability to negotiate sexual consent and to encourage ethical sexual intimacy (Carmody, 2006). Ultimately, such efforts may dispel the claim of misunderstanding as a cause of rape and counteract social acceptance of post-assault justifications for this crime.

Second, participants verbalised inadequacy and unwillingness to provide support following the disclosure of rape underscore the need for further informational assistance for rape victims' informal support providers. Withdrawal of support or "doing nothing" may be interpreted as a harmful response by rape victims (Ahrens, Cabral, & Abeling, 2009). In addition, asking for details about the assault, which represented another evident theme in participants' responses, if interpreted as doubting the victim's story, can be similarly hurtful (Ahrens, 2006). Although these responses, overall, appear well-intended, young adults need further access to information about how to provide more sensitive support to empower rape victims to seek formal or legal counsel, given that initial disclose is most likely to involve

friends (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012). It may be fruitful to increase availability and awareness of this form of assistance in high schools and at universities, given the high prevalence of alcohol-involved sexual assaults in the high school/university population (e.g., Lawyer, Resnick, Bakanic, Burkett, & Kilpatrick, 2010). These efforts are needed also to improve social support for victimised minority-group women and women of low socioeconomic status due to their high vulnerability to stigmatised reactions and negative post-assault outcomes (e.g., Ullman & Filipas, 2001).

Third, the apparent focus on victim-behaviour highlights the broader need to re-conceptualise rape as it is still viewed as mainly a female issue. It has been argued previously that interventions that focus on changing women's behaviour inherently place women as responsible for men's sexual aggression while masking a wider socio-cultural impact (Carmody, 2006; Kitzinger & Frith, 1999). This concern is sustained by findings of this study given that discussions about projected self-blame and future preventability centred around victim-behaviour and her responsibility to learn from, or develop with, the experience. Although empowering women with risk-awareness and efficient protective strategies is a fruitful effort, the need for interventions that recognise perpetrators' agency and, therefore, responsibility in preventing their sexual aggression remains critical. The campaign"Don't be that guy" launched in Edmonton, Canada in 2010 (http://www.savedmonton.com/) represents a significant response to this need.

Limitations

Despite the strength of a rigorous research process, this study has some noteworthy limitations. It is recognised that the vignette method compromises ecological validity given that the complexity of real-life sexual interaction cannot be captured through written depictions. The content of a written vignette may, nevertheless, be comparable to the information that victims disclose to their informal support providers in the aftermath of rape.

Accordingly, support providers are likely to react and respond to limited information, making their responses subject to inferences and biased interpretations. Given that victims may not define their victimisation as rape (Littleton & Henderson, 2009), support providers' labelling may similarly depend on descriptions of "bad" or regretted sex which may conceal a valid label of rape.

Given the sensitive topic and the somewhat artificial setting created by the research procedure, discussions may, potentially, have been inhibited or restricted by social desirability. Further to this limitation, we acknowledge that interviews, compared to focus groups, generated less rich data. All groups and interviews were also moderated by a female researcher which may have impacted differentially on male and female sessions. These limitations imply that socially undesirable attributions and beliefs may have been underestimated, particularly for the men in this study. However, reviewing of recorded personal reflections reveal that while some participants gave the impression of initial hesitance and restraint, most did not. The deliberate choice to use the same (female) moderator also allowed for complete immersion in the data which, ultimately, strengthened the rigor of the analysis process.

Conclusion

Overall, young men and women in this study conveyed a multi-faceted understanding of an incident which by legislative definition (in the state where this research was conducted) qualifies as rape, supporting the use of a qualitative methodology to elucidate young adults' rape perceptions. Although the alcohol-involved assault was significantly trivialised through its assigned labels, an appreciation of the potential harmful outcomes and barriers to disclosure was evident. Explicit responsibility and blame attributions were in stark contrast with implicit and rhetorical justifications for rape, with the latter reflecting the attributional double-standard previously observed in quantitative rape-perception research. Importantly,

the strong victim-focus in relation to rape-preventability coupled with the high responsibility attributed to the victim's behaviour are alarming and underscore continued efforts to re-conceptualise sexual violence as an issue of sexual aggression rather than a failure to avoid sexual victimisation.

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Table 1

Domains and Categories and their Associated Frequency Label derived from Focus-Group and Interview Data

Domain	Category	Relevant to	Frequency label
1. Labelling	It was not a “legitimate“ rape	Perpetrator and victim	Typical
	It was a misunderstanding	Perpetrator	Typical
	It was wrong	Perpetrator	Typical
	It was illegal	Perpetrator	Typical
	It was a learning experience	Victim	Typical
	It was a shameful/regretful experience	Victim	Typical
	It was a violation	Victim	Typical
	It was a trivial experience	Victim	Variant
2. Social Responses	Instrumental support	Perpetrator and victim	Typical
	Emotional support	Perpetrator and victim	General
	Negative reactions	Perpetrator and victim	Typical
	Asking for details	Perpetrator and victim	Variant
	Praise	Perpetrator	Typical
3. Risks, Responsibility, and Blame	The setting allowed for it to happen	Perpetrator and victim	Typical
	His choices were conscious and deliberate	Perpetrator	Typical
	She could have prevented it	Victim	Typical

Note. General, applied to all cases; Typical, applied to half of the cases or more; Variant, applied to fewer than half but more than one of the cases.